Train Brain Strain
Filed under:

- General

— Richard @ 11:09 am

I have become a regular visitor to Oxford as I am doing some research at the Oxford Internet Institute. This means exploring the wonderful world of railway timetables and tickets between London and Oxford. Having been completely bewildered by the different options I will post them here for my own future information and as a warning about how not to be customer friendly.

The options I think I have are as follows. To go there and back in a day I can get a Cheap Day Return. This costs £16-50 and is valid only after 9:30am for leaving London except for the 8:48am and 9:18am First Great Western Link trains which you can catch. There are other First Great Western trains via Reading before 9-30am that you cannot catch or you will pay £31-00 for a full day return.

If you want to go there one day and come back the next you can get a Network Away Break for £18-50, when bought in Oxford, or £19-00, when bought in London (why the difference?). This is valid for up to 5 days. It has a different set of restrictions so that you cannot get any trains out of London before 9:30am including the ones you would get with the Cheap Day Return (though different versions of this were given to me in Oxford, where they said I could get the earlier trains, and London, where they said I couldn’t).

If you want to buy a period return valid to come back up to a month later like you would for any other city you are told that these are simply not available. I have no idea why. You can get a period return for Sheffield to Oxford but not for London to Oxford.

And when it comes to timetables, bless the internet. This at least shows up the different options from different train companies, though I suspect that not all the possibilities are there. The printed timetables appear to be rigidly company by company so that you cannot see all the options together to work out which is best for you.

It is fortunate that residents of Oxford have brains the size of planets so that they can work all this out. I am struggling as poor punter but will no doubt get used to it.

Comments (4)
The Conservatives have announced their intention to withdraw from the United Nations Convention on Refugees if they come to power again. Their leader Michael Howard proudly announces this policy in a speech in which he makes use of his own family roots as a refugee from Nazi persecution in the second world war. Yet the 1951 Convention was drawn up as a response to the awful treatment suffered by many refugees during the 1939-45 war. It sets out a basic humane approach to dealing with refugees that has attracted 140 nations to sign up to it.

There are problems with the way in which claims for asylum are handled in this country. But these problems are largely administrative rather than being anything to do with the Refugee Convention itself. Many of these problems were also manifest during the last time the Conservatives were in office. At a time when conflict was growing internationally creating more potential asylum-seekers, the UK Government was cutting the number of staff available to deal with their claims leading to inevitable backlogs. The top priority should be ensuring that the systems for processing claims are effective rather than withdrawing from the Convention.

Withdrawal from the Convention is an example of gesture politics that would be entirely counter-productive. Withdrawal would not of itself reduce the number of people coming to the UK. They are not empowered to come to the UK because of the Convention but make it here via various routes, legal or otherwise, and then seek to exercise their Convention rights. Whether or not we take away their Convention rights the people are still here. It is naive to assume that people who are intent on illegal migration would be deterred from doing so because we had withdrawn from the Convention. And if Britain sets a lead on withdrawal and encourages other countries, many of which are far poorer and take in far more refugees in places like Africa and the Middle East, to do likewise then this could provoke a humanitarian disaster.

Yes, there is public concern about immigration, especially in the area of claims for asylum. Yes, we should improve the systems to ensure that they deal with people effectively and swiftly. But this will happen through the drudgery of the UK Government getting its administrative procedures right. Withdrawing from the Refugee Convention may sound good in the electoral battle but it is not the answer. It would be a shameful step for this country to take in publicly rejecting the international community’s civilised and humanitarian response to the awful suffering of refugees in conflicts in the early 20th century.

Comments (0)

4th Oct 04

The UKIP Phenomenon
Filed under:

- General

— Richard @ 10:24 am

The political news has been full of the battle between the UK Independence Party and the Conservative Party over the last few days. This was triggered by UKIP beating the Conservatives into fourth place in Hartlepool. The timing of this was opportune as we went straight into the UKIP conference and now the Conservative one in quick succession.

A conspiracy theorist might see the hand of Labour in this. An ex-Labour MP, Kilroy-Silk, has spiced up UKIP and is encouraging them to take on the Conservatives everywhere with a view to “killing” the old right wing party. The timing of the Hartlepool by-election was chosen by Labour and has turned out to be most damaging possible for the Conservatives as their conference is overshadowed.
pleasure should be tempered by a reasonable degree of fear about the implications for British politics. The reality is that the Conservatives have generally been a centre-right party bringing together a broad coalition of views. UKIP appear to be far more of a populist hard right party such as we have seen in other European countries of late.

I could live with a Conservative government even though I would be fiercely opposed to it. UKIP in power would be a much more worrying proposition. And while they are still relatively weak in terms of expected General Election votes they could have a very damaging effect on the Conservatives as they are painted into an ever more Eurosceptic corner. All mainstream parties that want to stay in the European Union, including the Conservatives, need to argue their case better rather than running away from the fight.

A small example. UKIP will tell us that 70% of UK regulations now come from the EU. This may be true. The implications of the UKIP argument though are that if we withdrew from the EU this 70% of regulations would not happen. This is not true. EU regulations stem from decisions of the Council of Ministers. They are drawn up because the 25 national governments want them. If we were not in the EU the UK Government would still have to regulate in many of these areas. This would either be simply because we as a nation need new regulation or because we needed it to trade with countries still in the EU.

For example, if our financial services wanted to sell to the EU and we were no longer in the Union then EU member states would still require us to meet their standards and we would have to introduce these in national legislation. This is the position that Switzerland increasingly finds herself in. So, we would have traded an EU regulatory process of which we are part through the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament for a national regulatory process dictated by our economic need to keep trading with the EU but in which we have no influence over the standards that we are required to meet. Some victory.

Comments (1)

28th Sep 04

Agenda Setters 2004
Filed under:

- General

— Richard @ 1:49 am

With the wonders of modern communication I can follow other strands of my work from Bogota. One of these is the Silicon.com Agenda Setters Panel of which I’ve been a member for three years. We get together each year and spend a pleasant morning discussing who is likely to be influential in the IT world over the coming year. I always learn a lot in the process. The results which are out today should provoke some debate, especially seeing as the list is headed by Ashley Highfield of the “old media” BBC who we clearly think is going to be a key new media player.

Comments (0)

26th Sep 04

Peace Brigades et al
Filed under:

- General
It has been an intense few days since arriving in Colombia. I tried to post something the other night but before I had the chance to save it we were hit by a short power cut that killed the computer. So here (with regular “Save as Draft”s) is a short update.

Wednesday and Thursday were spent in rounds of meetings with politicians, British and Colombian NGO’s and staff at the British Embassy. Very useful background and confirmation that there are hugely divergent views about the success or otherwise of the current Colombian Government.

On Friday I made a visit that I had been promising to do for several years to a Peace Brigades International project in a city called Barranabermeja an hour from Bogota by plane. This city has seen some of the worst violence in Colombia’s recent history from both guerrillas and paramilitaries. The Peace Brigades project aims to protect local NGO’s by accompanying their members as they go about their business.

And from what I heard is that it has been very successful in fulfilling its aims. I visited two very impressive local NGO’s, Credhos and the Organizacion Femenina Popular. Members of both organisations have sadly been murdered over the years and they still live with threats from illegal armed groups. The Peace Brigades project has however meant that there has been constant international attention to their work. They are in no doubt that without this vigilance their work would have ceased altogether.

The hope now is that they will be allowed the space to do their work as community-based human rights organisations. This is still by no means certain as there is still a strong paramilitary presence in Barrancabermeja. I was accompanied by security staff from the British Embassy, one of whom is a Colombian police officer. They told me that when they were having lunch there was a table nearby with four paramilitaries with pistols in their belts. Glances were exchanged as they checked out the strangers in town but nothing worse.

There are between 150 and 200 of these paramilitaries in the town. They fund themselves through drug trafficking, stealing petrol from the local refinery and “taxes” on local businesses. They remain a threat to anyone who interferes with their control of the area and so can target NGO’s and Colombian state officers as well as the guerrilla. There can be no real peace until their power is broken. The big debate in Colombia now is how that can be done and whether the demobilisation process that the Government has started will really lead to their removal from the scene or simply convert them into a legitimised oppressive force.

Having been to Barrancabermeja and back on Friday, Saturday saw me back at the airport at 6am for a military flight to Monteria to see the President and Government in action. This was quite an experience and will I think have to wait for a chapter of its own later today.

Comments (1)

22nd Sep 04

**Bogota Beats Bournemouth**

Filed under:

- General

--- Richard @ 2:52 pm

This is my most long distance blog yet as I am sat at a computer in the Colombian capital of Bogota. I am conscious that the rest of my Lib Dem colleagues are setting out policy platforms for the next election in Bournemouth. This may provoke questions as to the extreme lengths to which someone will go to avoid party conference. And I’m sure that many seasoned conference goers will understand the attraction of Bogota over Bournemouth but there is also a more serious reason for my turning up in Colombia.
I chair the All Party Group on Colombia in Parliament. These are groups of MPs interested in particular countries. They can often attract scorn as “travel clubs” for politicians. But they can also do some very useful and serious work. I hope that this is what we do with the Colombia group where we meet regularly with visiting Colombians from the Government and civil society, with UK NGOs that work in Colombia, and with the UK Minister.

I was last in the country in 1998 and have come back now to try and update myself on what is happening here. There is a new direction to the country under the current President Uribe. This has been controversial, not least amongst human rights groups. And there is a series of Human Rights recommendations from the UN that the government has yet to meet. At the same time, the general impression is that the new government is very popular with the Colombian people as it is getting to grips with the lawlessness that has prevailed in much of the country for 50 years.

I hope through a series of meetings and visits to be able to understand some of this complexity and use it to inform our debate in the UK Parliament.

More to follow…

Comments (1)

16th Sep 04

Too Much Excitement for One Day

Filed under:

- General

— Richard @ 9:52 am

One idea for a blog comment yesterday was rapidly succeeded by another as events unfolded in Parliament. Here is a short summary of them all.

1. What’s happening to the Prime Minister? Why was he so apparently demob happy at question time yesterday? Could he be on his way? An announcement at the Labour Party conference perhaps? Or is this just wishful thinking on my part…

2. Hunting, hunting, hunting. I think the substance of this needs a longer post. I have produced a letter to constituents that sets out my view on the subject and will post this up.

3. Security and the protests. Well, what a to do. The security failure cannot be overstated. The protesters could have come in during Prime Minister’s Questions when most MPs were there. They could have had weapons hidden in the House. Perhaps it is just a matter of time before an incident like this has a deadly outcome either because a protester is shot or there is a real terrorist attack. It certainly feels that way on the inside.

4. An assault on democracy? The civil war of the mid seventeenth century was triggered by the King violating the Commons chamber. Since then, this has been seen as a special place that no outside force should enter. It is one of the cornerstones of our democracy that MPs can debate and vote openly in that space. I think this principle is worth preserving. Similarly, I vehemently opposed the Iraq war and joined the millions protesting against it but would still not have wished to see the debate and vote on the war in Parliament disrupted.

Comments (3)

13th Sep 04
There is nothing more guaranteed to make your brain feel old and worn out than to require it to work with concepts that you understood easily many years ago but now find only come to you after long periods of utmost concentration.

I made a commitment to work on a new feature for the excellent TheyWorkForYou.com site over the summer. This is to provide an email alert service so that you can register your interest in a particular MP and receive an email each time they are recorded as speaking in Parliament.

I have been duly working on this and enjoying it. For the technically minded, this means working in PHP code which I like. But the real mental struggle for me has been to try to get my head back round the use of arrays, especially multi-dimensional ones.

For the non-initiated, these are devices that programmers use to hold lots of data so that they can easily get to it. For example, if you wanted to show a table on a screen or a spreadsheet with cells full of text, you would hold the data in an array and then tell the front-end programme how to display it.

The basic array in two dimensions is more or less back in focus now. But you can keep adding dimensions on and having arrays within arrays. There it starts to hurt. Oh, the joy of stretching your mind…

Today MPs are dragging themselves back to Westminster to sit for the next two weeks before the party conferences. This is only the second year that this has happened. Before that the summer recess went on until after the conferences which meant Parliament did not sit between the third week of July and the second or third week of October. The new timetable is not popular amongst many colleagues and they are busy asking questions about how much it costs to open up for these two weeks.

My guess is that the public would rather we came back in September than leave the Government unscrutinised for the best part of three months. What do you think? Should we or could we go back to the long recess? Or is the new timetable which pretty much follows the English schools term timetable the best option?
On an entirely domestic note, I have picked up something called *The Orange Book* in my office. This has caused a bit of a stir within the party I understand as it is portrayed as the “Young Turks” trying to take us off to the right.

Most of the authors are friends of mine so I hope will forgive me some “constructive criticism”. Some of the chapters in the book are very good. The chapter that may cause the greatest stir (no doubt intentionally) suggests replacing the current NHS with an insurance/market solution. Well, this chapter it has to be said leaves a lot (like everything) to be desired. In particular, it asserts that “choice” and “competition” are desirable objectives in and of themselves. There is no evidence presented for why this should be the case. I want to see health policies that deliver the best health outcomes for the most people. Choice and competition may or may not have a role in achieving this objective but they are certainly not ends in themselves.

Half a cheer to David Laws for a contribution to the policy debate but he is going to have to try a lot harder than that before he has any kind of coherent case for radical change. My own instinct is that the more you look into this properly, the more it will become clear that the NHS is a pretty good provider of health services to the population as a whole.

Comments (3)

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